

## **A Comparison of Chinese and American Student Academic Email Requests to Faculty in Higher Education in the United States**

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### **Abstract**

To explore email request patterns in the institutional context of university settings, this study combines speech act research with conversation analysis methods to examine how native speakers of American English and native speakers of Chinese formulate email requests to faculty. 100 authentic email requests sent by Chinese and American students who studied in a U.S. university was collected. The methodology of conversation analysis was used to investigate how imposition level of emails and senders' entitlement to make the request affect students' language choices. The findings demonstrate that Chinese students have some pragmatic infelicities in their email requests, such as underuse of internal and external modifications for high-imposition requests, presenting request head acts at the beginning of emails, and pre-assuming that the requestee would grant the request. This study finally offers pedagogical implications for teaching email requests to English learners. This study contributes to our understanding of the requestive patterns of Chinese and American students as well as the similarities and differences between emails written by American students and those written by Chinese students. It contributes to the field of cross-cultural pragmatic studies on the speech act of request by L2 speakers.

**Keywords:** second language pragmatics, email requests, Chinese as a Second Language learners

## **Introduction**

This article compares and contrasts the speech act of requests in academic emails to instructors written in English by university students in the United States who are native speakers of Chinese and those written by native speakers of American English. Emails have become one commonly used and important medium for communication between faculty and students in college for their convenience and efficiency (Bisenbach-Lucas, 2007). Emails used in academic settings entail functions such as collecting students' assignments, announcing course arrangements, and delivering course materials, etc. The purposes of students' emails to instructors, however, are usually to make requests (Chalak et al, 2010). Students have to use email to express their needs and ask for help if they cannot meet with the requestee face-to-face. Email communication creates a kairotic space through which students can access resources and help from the faculty. Email requests are an important representative of academic discourse. However, as there exists a power asymmetry between professors and students, professors can ignore, reject students' requests and delay their responses, especially if they consider the request inappropriate or the way students make the request impolite (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016). The language that students use in emails can have significant influence on instructors' perceptions of students, even influence their willingness to work with them (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012). Furthermore, the requestees form their impression of the requesters solely dependent upon written discourse of the email per se; students do not have chances to mitigate the messages once an email is sent. These facts make the nature of email communication more high-stakes.

Making a request can be a face-threatening act that impacts the negative face of the requestee and the positive face of the requester (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The imposition levels of the requests vary dependent upon request types and whether the actions required are inside or outside of the instructors' responsibilities. Even though it is not totally inappropriate to request instructors to perform tasks that are not a part of their responsibilities in most institutional contexts, they are still face-threatening because the senders want recipients to spend time on something they would not do otherwise (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Therefore, if a request is made culturally inappropriately, the act can harm both the requester and the requestee.

Making requests politely is one factor that contributes to the acceptance of requests, but students may feel it not easy to write email requests to people with a higher status where power asymmetry should be maintained (Chen, 2006). International students, many of whom lack knowledge of American norms and pragmatic competence, may find it even harder to write emails to instructors. As second language learners of American English, international students tend to use what is appropriate and polite in their own cultures and assume that it will also work well in American culture (Chen, 2006). The determination of what cultural norms to use in specific situations is highly related to sociolinguistic factors and the contexts of the conversations; the interplay between linguistic choices and contexts are too complex for many international students to master in a short period of time. For example, Aijmer (2015) observed that international students are usually taught that "please" is one politeness marker that softens the tone of an utterance, but "please" can be ironic and offensive; therefore, many international students are not able to formulate polite requests, and they could even construct offensive requests unintentionally.

When faculty and staff working in American universities receive such emails, they could be offended and refuse the students' requests. Unclear communication could have negative impacts on relationships between students and teachers. In this way, cross-cultural

miscommunication occurs between people from one culture and people from another culture (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012). There may even be stereotypes that certain students are rude; however, in fact, they simply do not know politeness norms (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016). Chinese culture and American culture are different in many aspects, and Chinese students studying in the U.S. are very likely to have the problem of structuring polite academic email requests.

Another motivation for this study is to uncover whether Chinese English L2 learners and NSs differ in their use of politeness strategies and linguistic features in email requests. Blum-Kulka and Levenston (1987) revealed that when non-native speakers (NNSs) use linguistic devices differently from native speakers (NSs), their pragmatic effects can be different from the intended acts; this might in turn cause misunderstanding in communication and even pragmatic inadequacy. Thomas (1983) claims that pragmatic failure can lead to miscommunication, and pragmatic failure has two sources: sociopragmatic failure (i.e., not being able to identify social variables involved in the situations and know how to choose appropriate languages in specific contexts), and pragmalinguistic failure (i.e., lacking abilities to understand intentional meanings of utterances). By investigating the differences between academic email requests made by Native American English-speaking students, the study can shed light on whether Chinese students have adequate pragmatic competence when writing email requests. This study also presents an approach, which combines conversation analysis with pragmatics, to examine email requests that demonstrate the interplay between internal modification, external modification, and situational and contextual variations. Results of the study can encourage second language educators to put more effort into teaching pragmatic knowledge. The study has implications for the methodology of future research studies on email communication, for students learning email writing, as well as teaching email requests.

### **Literature review**

#### ***Email request and linguistic politeness***

Many studies have explored linguistic politeness in the speech act of request. Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving view stands out among other approaches to linguistic politeness because of its comprehensiveness, operationalizability, and thoroughness (Locher & Watts, 2005), and it has been used by many studies on request strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009; Hong, 1996; Lee, 2004; Murphy & De Felice, 2018; Ogiermann, 2009; Zhu, 2012). The sociolinguistic variables such as social distance, social power, and imposition level that help determine what linguistic politeness strategies to use as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) are used in the current study.

Previous studies have explored requestive strategies, lexical/phrasal modifications, and external modifications in requests in terms of linguistic politeness theories in various languages (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009; Hong, 1996; House, 1989; Ling, 2003; Murphy & De Felice, 2008; Ogiermann, 2009; Weizman, 1989). As email communication has become an accepted means of communication in universities (Bisenbach-Lucas, 2007), researchers have turned their attention to the investigation of requestive features and politeness in email requests between student-faculty interactions. Some of these pragmatics studies on email practice have examined how emails differ from oral discourse (Bloch, 2002); others focused on the ways that NNSs of English write L2 email requests from a pragmatic perspective and how linguistic features that deviate from NSs of English may violate norms of politeness and appropriateness required to maintain power asymmetry in student-faculty communication (Bloch, 2002; Chen, 2006;

Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). These studies show that NNSs use fewer supportive moves and fewer various lexical and syntactic structures in emails. For example, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) showed that the openings and closings of emails were missing in the majority of NNSs' emails. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) assessed the effect of email requests from NSs and NNSs on faculty recipients and found that NNSs' use of politeness features and extra-linguistic features are different from that of NSs. Studies on Chinese English L2 learners' emails yielded similar results. In her case study, Chen (2006) found inappropriateness in emails sent by a Taiwanese student, who also emphasized student-centered needs and personal details rather than institutional demands. Zhu's (2011) study on NNS email requests and Zhu's (2012) study on Chinese EFL learners' email requests revealed that Chinese EFL learners tended to use much fewer indirect requestive strategies, syntactic and lexical modification than British students did. Some research studies on mainland Chinese requests were small-scale and were conducted in only one or two provinces (Hong, 1996; Ling, 2003), impacting the validity of the results. Participants of previous studies on Chinese students' emails were mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan (e.g., Chen 2001, 2006; Lee, 2004) where social norms are different from those in mainland China, and no research has examined mainland Chinese academic emails written in ESL contexts.

These differences between NSs and NNSs emails may have pragmatic effects. When NNSs used lexical and syntactic features in different ways from NS norms, they often have different pragmatic effects from their intended effects (Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1987). The studies on email requests that compared NSs and NNSs emails all ended their research by pointing out pragmatic failures in academic emails sent by English as a second or foreign language learners to instructors in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts as a result of deviation from NSs' language performance (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Bloch, 2002; Chen, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Zhu, 2012).

### ***Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project and Limitations***

Many of the studies on email requests have followed the categorization system of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000). The CCSARP framework analyzed politeness devices at lexical and syntactic levels such as direct and indirect strategies, request modifications, and request perspectives, and investigated cross-cultural differences in the realization of speech acts based on frequencies of occurrence of strategies. However, the CCSARP scholars used Discourse Completion Tasks to collect data, which cannot capture authentic language use in authentic situations (Culpeper et al., 2018). In addition, this framework adopts preconceived categories for grouping request strategies such as query-preparatory, need-statement, and imperative and then categorized authentic data into those categories (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). The use of a preconceived coding scheme is limited in analyzing authentic email requests because authentic emails are more varied and could adopt strategies that are not included in the CCSARP system. Furthermore, these studies group request strategies and features into different categories based on the CCSARP coding scheme and examine them as isolated, while the interaction aspect of requests has been overlooked. Therefore, the data collection methods and the analytical framework of these previous studies on email requests in student-faculty interactions are limited.

The approaches of conversation analysis enable researchers to examine naturally occurring discourse in contexts as data can be analyzed in sequences of information instead of in

single utterances. Conversation analysis (CA) has been used in analyzing written online discourse (González-Lloret, 2015; Meredith, 2019), including email interaction (Duranti, 1984), as well as speech acts studies on requests (Curl & Drew, 2008; Ilmuro, 2006). CA approach provides a data-driven analysis because categories of analysis are developed from members' perspective rather than determined beforehand (ten Have, 1999), contrary to studies employing the CCSARP framework. Therefore, it can offer a complementary view of comparison studies that involve the way that L2 learners of English and NNSs write email requests. The CA approach can provide a microanalysis to show in detail how email writers come to accomplish a particular social action, and how their language choices at both lexical level and discourse level are influenced by social variables of a particular situation.

### ***Purpose of the current study***

Despite the limitations of CCSARP in analyzing speech acts, not many studies examined requests made by L2 speakers from the conversation analytic perspective (Ilmuro, 2006). To better understand requests by L2 speakers of English, researchers could conduct more studies using discourse/conversation analysis method (Ilmuro, 2006). To further analyze email requests, the current study aims to discover patterns in authentic email requests from students to instructors by employing a method of conversation analysis that avoids pre-conceived categories and investigates characteristics of naturally-occurring emails in context instead of in single, isolated sentences.

This study focuses on comparing email requests written by native speakers of Chinese who are originally from mainland China and now studying at a Midwestern American university with those written by native speakers of English. Using the level of entitlement and the ranking of imposition of email request as two factors, the study explores how these factors influence the ways that students write email requests. Entitlement is defined as whether a requester can legitimately make a particular type of request to a particular person and expect to receive compliance from the requestee (Spencer-Oatey & Jiang, 2003). Ranking of imposition is defined as "how great is the request you are making" (Thomas, 1995, p. 130). The ranking of imposition is influenced by factors such as time, effort, financial burden, and right (Fukushima, 2000). Academic emails written by Chinese students and emails written by American students and sent to faculty were collected. The research questions of the study are as follows:

- 1) How do imposition of the request and requester's entitlement to make the request affect linguistic forms that students choose for each type of email request?
- 2) What are the differences between the request strategies employed by native speakers of American English and those used by native speakers of Chinese?

### **Method**

One of the goals of the study is to show how conversation analysis can contribute to research in email requests, complementing insights provided by other methodologies. Electronic written communication can be seen as a type of "talk in interaction" and can be analyzed using the methodology of conversation analysis (Paulus et al., 2016). Researchers have used CA for analyzing online written discourse (e.g., Kitade, 2000; Koshik & Okazawa, 2012), including emails (e.g., Danby et al., 2009; Harrison, 2003).

This study used a questionnaire to collect authentic emails written to instructors by Chinese students and American students who studied at a Midwestern university. The first section of the questionnaire includes a background questionnaire concerning ethnographic and

cultural backgrounds of participants. Then questionnaire requires students to submit three to five complete emails they wrote to their college professors and instructors from address terms to endings. Students were instructed to replace identifiable information such as instructors' names, their names, university, department, major, course information, address, and phone with markers such as "FirstName" for first names. Along with each email the participants submitted, questions related to the recipient were asked, such as the requestee's approximate age, gender, student and the instructor's academic relationship (e.g., the professor serves as the chair on the student's thesis committee), and the social distance between student and instructor, which is defined as the degree of intimacy and closeness or absence of intimacy and closeness between interlocutors (Boxer, 1993). The accuracy of the recipient's personal information was not confirmed because the focus of the paper is to analyze how students write emails based on their evaluations of what language use would be appropriate to the type of instructors that they perceived. Of all the emails, one instructor was a male native Spanish-speaking professor in his forties; the other instructors are native speakers of American English.

Native speakers of Chinese who are from mainland China and native speakers of American English participated in the first survey. Fifty-three participants filled out the questionnaire, and fifty responses (thirty Chinese students and twenty American students) met the criteria described in the questionnaire. Each participant was asked to submit three to five emails, and 159 emails were collected. 100 of the 159 emails contained at least one request and were useful for the current study. 44 of the 100 emails were written by American students to instructors. 17 of these were written by graduate students, and 27 emails were written by undergraduate students. 56 of the 100 emails were written by Chinese students to American instructors. 38 of these were written by graduate students and 18 emails were written by undergraduate students.

The analytical procedure is descriptive in nature. The analysis is a matter of close reading and interpretation of each sentence of emails in relation to the social action they performed and the potential effect on their recipient in relation to their context. I first identified the action of an email, the requester's entitlement to make the request, and the ranking of imposition of the request. The 100 emails with requests were categorized into four major categories based on the imposition of the email and the requester's entitlement to request. Under each major category, emails were grouped into sub-categories according to the actions of the request (e.g., to request an appointment, to request a recommendation letter). Then I examined what request patterns exist under each category, and how students use linguistic forms depending on their entitlement to make the request and the imposition of the request. In this process, I drew from previous literature's analytical tools such as syntactic modifiers, lexical modifiers, internal modification, external modification, and grounders (e.g. Bisenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogestidis, 2011) to inform my interpretation of linguistic devices and strategies. Finally, I compared Chinese students' emails and American students' emails. I analyzed all 100 emails, but because of limited space, I presented two emails that are most representative of students' email request patterns from each category. The social action of emails and email categories as well as the email types I generated and the results of my interpretation of typical emails under each category were verified by a professor in applied linguistics. In terms of ambiguous or challenging cases, we discussed them together to make the analysis as reliable as possible.

### **Analysis**

In this section, I analyze how imposition levels of the requests, the senders' entitlements to make the requests via email, and the relationship between the sender and the recipient affect students' language choices. I categorize the request into four different types, depending on the ranking of imposition and the level of student's entitlement to make the request, select typical emails under each type, analyze American students' emails, and compare Chinese students' emails with those written by American students.

#### ***High imposition, low entitlement emails***

Emails that fall under this category have high imposition and requesters have relatively little right to make the request and expect compliance from requestees. Some common email types include requesting appointment or mentoring from professors who have no responsibilities to assist students, scheduling a meeting outside of professors' office hours, and requesting recommendation letters. The email was written by an American graduate student to the advisor of her undergraduate research project to request recommendation letters.

Example 1 (Sender: a 22-year-old female graduate American student; Recipient: a female

professor in her thirties)

Good afternoon Dr. FirstName LastName,

I received an email Thursday evening from University XX for the Graduate & Professional Student Recruitment Initiative Program that takes place there in October:

“Your name was submitted to us by one of your current university advisors as a student who might be planning to pursue a post-baccalaureate degree following graduation. We believe that University XX would be a great place to consider for opportunities at the graduate/professional level. We encourage you to set aside some time this spring/summer to discover what University XX has to offer by logging on to University XX for more information about admission, application and funding at University XX. For the opportunity to personally see University XX for yourself, consider submitting your application to attend our annual Graduate & Professional Student Recruitment Initiative Program. “

I also received an email on the same night from University XX, letting me know that they have extended their deadline for their XX Program:

“Due to the unfortunate interference from hurricanes Harvey and Irma, the application deadline for the XX Program has been extended to 12 PM CENTRAL TIME on MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2017. After then, we will be unable to extend the application deadline for any reason. All of your materials, including BOTH

letters of recommendation, must be received AND your application must be submitted in order for it to be reviewed and evaluated! PLEASE REMEMBER TO SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION!"

Both applications ask for a letter of support from a faculty member. I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to write my letter(s). I understand it is very short notice. I was not aware of the XX University program until I received this email, and I was not originally going to apply to the XX University recruitment program until my mentor highly suggested to do so.

The letter(s) would be submitted electronically via a link, and they are the same format: why you support me in applying for the recruitment program. With that said, the same letter can be used for both applications.

I know you have had quite the busy semester already, so I would be very grateful if you were able to write me this recommendation, and I thank you in advance for your time and consideration. The XX University letter of support is due by Noon this Monday, September 18th. The XX University letter of support is due next Friday, September 22nd. If this is not possible on such short notice, I completely understand. I want to thank you anyway, and in the future, I will get things to you ahead of the deadline.

Thank you,

FirstName LastName

This American undergraduate student was requesting a recommendation letter from a professor. The imposition level of requesting recommendation letters is high because the professor needs to spend a long time thinking, writing letters, and submitting the letters. It is not mandatory for a professor to write a letter for every student who asks. However, the requestee was the student's advisor, so the student has a relatively high entitlement to ask. However, the request was made on short notice, increasing the imposition level and decreasing the student's entitlement to ask. Therefore, the student used many supportive moves in her email.

She first copied and pasted two extracts of emails she had received to give the professor an idea of what those recruitment programs were. She mentioned the date that she received the email to prepare herself to explain later in the email why she requested a recommendation letter

on short notice. After citing the programs' emails, she transitioned into the main purpose of the email by pointing out "both applications ask for a letter of support from a faculty member." She then made the request statement using "I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to write my letter(s)." Past tense ("wanted") and modal verb ("would") were used to mitigate the request. Instead of telling her professor to write a reference letter, she was asking about the possibility of the professor writing the letters. To avoid any potential accusations, the student explained why she made the request on short notice and introduced how the letters can be submitted. The student tried to lower the imposition involved by saying that one letter can be used for both programs as long as the letter meets specific requirements.

In the next paragraph, the student conveyed her gratitude to the professor for taking the time and effort to write reference letters. She gave the application deadlines of the two programs and expressed her understandings if the professor cannot write the letters. By giving the professor opportunities to reject the request, the requester tried to eliminate the request's influence on the requestee's negative face. The student expressed her appreciation for the professor taking the time to read the email as well and promised that she would improve her time management in the future.

Example 2 (Sender: a 23-year-old female Chinese graduate student; Recipient: a male American

professor in his sixties)

Dear Dr. LastName,

I am writing to you to request that you provide a reference for me as I begin my fall internship search. I am trying to apply for a graduate student employee position for the Dept XX. As attached is the flyer of job description.

I submitted my resume and cover letter to the program coordinator, and now she wanted me to provide one academic reference contact information for her. As my graduate advisor, I believe that a reference from you will provide her with relevant information.

If you need any additional information, please let me know.

Thanks for your consideration and support.

Best,

S\_FirstName

The Chinese student was requesting that her advisor in the academic program provide her with a reference. She began the email with "I am writing to you to request that you provide a reference for me". In the example above where an American student asked for a recommendation letter, her request head act began with "I wanted to ask"—which functions as both a syntactic modifier (past tense) and a lexical modifier (subjectivizer)—and if-clause to indicate that the sender does not expect the recipient to comply with the request.

After making the request, the Chinese student began to provide more information about the position that she was applying for. She also attached the flyer containing job descriptions. The American student also provided information about the programs she was applying to, but she copied and pasted two short paragraphs in the body of the email. She made it easier for the recipient to read the necessary information. Admittedly, the recipient would know more detailed information reading a flyer, but it would also take the recipient more time, impacting the negative face of the recipient even more.

In the next paragraph, the Chinese student used "As my graduate advisor, I believe that a reference from you will provide her with relevant information" to show the importance of having a reference from the professor. However, she did not realize that emphasizing her needs could

make her request more coercive, especially when she had not used any mitigations so far in the email. Also, she might not realize that even if the professor was her graduate advisor, it was not necessarily his job to write her a reference letter.

She then assumed the professor would grant the request and asked if he needs more information to provide a reference for her. However, the American student did not pre-assume the professor's compliance with the request. The American student removed any possible objections the recipient might have, apologized on requesting the professor to complete the reference in a short period of time, and conveyed her appreciation for the professor's support and time more than once. She also expressed her understanding if the professor cannot grant the request. Another difference is that the Chinese student gave the request head act quite early in the email while the American student delayed the purpose of the writing.

***High imposition, high entitlement emails***

When students report the progress they have made on their own projects to professors, they want feedback, assistance, and directions from their advisors. Professors also need preparations on their side before giving students feedback. Therefore, I categorize these emails in the high-imposition, high-entitlement category. Usually, students were primarily reporting their work; seeking feedback was a secondary action of the email.

Example 3 (Sender: a 26-year-old male American graduate student; Recipient: a male professor in his fifties)

Hey Professor,

Please find attached the equation of state for water from IAPWS. It can be found on page 44 of the included pdf. I have also typed up the equation into the attached power point along with the isothermal compressibility. Also attached is the excel sheet with the required coefficients. I wanted to share it with you first cause it seems like a very complicated equation, so I wasn't sure if there was another version you were thinking of.

Thanks

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S\_FirstName S\_LastName

Dept XX

University XX

email

Phone

The email above was written by an American graduate student to one of his thesis

committee members. The student was reporting research progress he had made. He described what he had been doing with the research first and stated the reason why he wanted to share the equation with the professor in the last sentence. The email ends with a requestive hint, which suggested the students hoped the professor would comment on the equation. Requesting is not the main action of the email, but the student was also seeking any potential feedback the professor might have. The student used a hint which orients to the possibility that the professor had another version of the equation. The student did not explicitly point out what he wanted the professor to do. Therefore, the professor can decide on whether to give feedback or to meet or not.

Example 4 (Sender: a 23-year-old male Chinese graduate student who lived in Canada for three months; Recipient: a 46-year-old male Chinese professor)

Hi prof.LastName,

This is my updated poster. Please check it, any suggestions will be appreciated.

Firstname

The email was from a Chinese graduate student to his supervisor. In this short email, the student asked the supervisor to give feedback on his poster, which he may need to use in a conference presentation. This email has two sentences: the first one pointed out what the attachment of the email was, and the second one was the request head act. Similar to the previous email, the student requested that the professor give him feedback. The student used an imperative to make the request, adding "please" at the beginning of the sentence to intensify the request. He tried to soften the request by saying that "any suggestions will be appreciated". However, this request is direct and demanding overall. This email does not contain sufficient details explaining why he was making the request. The head act is much more direct, and it does not give the requestee an option not to comply with the request, either.

### ***Low imposition, high entitlement emails***

Low imposition, high entitlement emails have the largest number in my dataset. This email category includes emails whose imposition ranking is low because the time, effort, and burden imposed on the requestee are low and where requesters can legitimately make the requests. Most emails in this category fall under the situation where students request clarification, information, instruction, or advice from their professors. "Request for information" is the request type that contains the biggest number of emails, indicating that one primary purpose of students writing an email to professors is to request information about courses, research projects, etc. Most emails under this category are shorter and more direct than emails of other request types.

Example 5 (Sender: an 18-year-old female American undergraduate student; Recipient: a female professor in her forties)

Professor LastName:

I know you previously sent an email regarding the material on our exam from chapters 2 to chapter 3. With that being said, I believe we only have to do those inquisitive assignments by tonight. However, chapter 4 still says it is due tonight by 11:59pm. Will the chapter 4 deadline be moved back? Please let me know!

Thank you so much,

S\_FirstName; S\_LastName

The email is from an American undergraduate student to her course instructor. She wanted to know if the professor announced the deadline for an assignment. She first established a common ground between her and the professor by mentioning that the professor had sent an email to students about an exam from chapters two to chapters three. Then she explained how the email made her think that only "those inquisitive assignments" need to be finished "by tonight." She pointed out a discrepancy between the professor's email and the deadline of chapter four elsewhere, which made her confused about the deadlines of chapter four. In this way, she gradually built an argument that the deadline of chapter four should not be "tonight". Then she used an information-seeking interrogative to ask the deadline of the assignment. She did not use mitigations in this low-imposition request. The email ends with "please let me know" and an exclamation mark that expresses her strong feeling that she wanted the professor to reply. It may also be an expression of urgency since the deadline is that night.

Example 6 (Sender: a 23-year-old female Chinese graduate student; Recipient: a male American professor in his fifties)

Hi Prof. LastName,

I'm available at 3:30pm tomorrow. I did some measurement and data analysis last week, but I wonder if there's some specific topic of our talk. Maybe I can do more preparation for it. Thank you! See you tomorrow!

Best,

S\_FirstName

The email was written by a Chinese graduate student to her advisor to ask information about a future meeting. She might have emailed her advisor a couple of times before she wrote this email. The student first confirmed her availability the day after. She had made an appointment with the advisor and was asking whether there would be a topic for their meeting. She first reported what she had done with data analysis, suggesting this could be a potential topic for the meeting. Then she asked if the professor had a specific topic in mind. She

used “I wonder if” to mitigate the force of the request. The imposition level of the request is low—the professor only needs to reply to the email to grant the request—and as the student's advisor, he was supposed to inform the student of the topic of their meeting. In comparison, the American student used an unmitigated information-seeking question for information-seeking requests. After the request head act, the Chinese student provided a reason to further explain why she request the topic of their future meeting. The information sequence of the American and the Chinese email is also different—the American email provided supportive moves before the request head acts while the Chinese email gave a reason to support the request after the request head act was given.

***Low imposition, Low entitlement emails***

Three emails in my dataset fall under the category of low imposition, low entitlement emails. These requests are not hard to be granted, but the requestees do have the responsibility to comply with students’ needs. The two examples below also request information, but their senders had low-entitlement to make the request and the requestees were not responsible for granting the requests.

Example 7 (Sender: a 25-year-old female American graduate student; Recipient: a female American professor in her forties)

Hi Dr. LastName,

I hope you've enjoyed your summer and are looking forward to teaching a new group of students next week!

Since I officially graduated earlier this month, I've been going through my course websites on Moodle and Compass in order to save some course materials before I lose access to them.

I noticed that the Class XX course from Fall 2017 is no longer displayed in my list of courses on Compass, even though I still have access to other courses. Would it be possible to restore my access to the Class XX course, at least for a day or two, so I can download the course materials? Statistics is one of those things that I feel I will need to review often in the future.

Thanks very much!

S\_FirstName

This email was written by an American graduate student to her course instructor. The student requested that the professor give her access to a course website. The sender was a former student in the course who had graduated when the request was made, which eliminates her right

to make the request.

The student begins the email with a phatic greeting to show friendliness. After that, the student began to list several reasons why she was making the requests. She first stated that she had graduated when she wrote the email, which explains why "I have been going through my course websites...to save some materials". This reason also functions as a pre-request. She emphasized that she could still use other course websites to consolidate her rights to make the request. Then she used "would it be possible" to start the request head act. In the request head act, she asked about the possibility of restoring access to the course website. The requester knew that she was not entitled to ask the professor to give her course access, so she used the phrase "at least one day or two" to limit her access—she did not want to have permanent access but temporary access only to download course materials. She added a post-grounder to explain why and how important the materials are to convince the requestee to comply with the request. She ended the email with a sentence conveying appreciation with an exclamation mark to intensify her gratitude.

The student requested that the professor take time to give her access to a course website, which is not a high-imposition request. However, the professor does not need to ensure that course materials are accessible to former students. The student acknowledged that she did not have to right to ask for the course website, so she provided many grounders both before and after the request head act.

Example 8 (Sender: a 23-year-old male Chinese graduate student; Recipient: a male American professor in his forties)

Dear Prof. LastName,

I am S\_FirstName. I am interested in the XXX you talked about in the meeting today. Is it possible to send me XXX thesis so that I can read something about it?

Thank you very much,

S\_FirstName

This email was written by a Chinese graduate student to a professor in his department, requesting the professor send him a copy of a thesis. The professor had worked collaboratively with the research group the student was in, but he was not close to the professor. The student first identified himself using his first name. Then he expressed his interest in what the professor talked about in a meeting that day. The student might want to use the sentence as a pre-request. The student started his topic introduction, followed by the request statement in which he used "is it possible", an indirect requestive strategy, to ask about the possibility of the professor complying with the request. The request head act is followed by an account ("so that I can read something about it"). The student showed that he was interested in the topic and wanted to explore the topic further, justifying his position as a student eager to learn more about the subject area. When the American student made the low-entitlement request, she provided substantial details to support the request and convey how important the request was to increase the chances of getting the request complied with. The Chinese student also used an account, but he simply

mentioned "I am interested" in the topic that the professor talked about. The argument made by the Chinese student is weaker than that made by the American student.

### **Discussion**

Request head acts in American students' emails are usually delayed. American students usually begin their emails with a greeting to establish a friendly relationship between them and the requestees. They might introduce or identify themselves depending on the relationship between them and the requestees. After that, American students give one reason or several reasons from different perspectives for making the requests. Request head acts are given after students have provided adequate background information for requestees to understand why they have to make the requests and reasons to support their requests. Some Chinese emails also follow the sequencing of information mentioned above, but the request head acts in many of the emails are at the beginning of the body of the emails, and supportive moves follow the request head acts. For example, in a request for instruction email, a Chinese student asked his question first, then explained why he was confused about the question. This finding is inconsistent with some previous studies that analyze emails in English written by Chinese students. Chen (2001) compared authentic emails in English that were written by Taiwanese students and American students. She claimed that academic emails from Chinese students to faculty demonstrated a transfer from Chinese politeness and rhetoric strategies to English. Chen (2001) pointed out that the most obvious transferred strategy is that Chinese students delay the request statements. She claimed that the delayed request head acts might reduce the persuasive force of their requests. A case study conducted by Chen (2006) shows that a Taiwanese student used the sequence of information mentioned above. Based on some email writing books, Chen (2006) claimed that providing details and contextual information on why the request needed to be made and delaying request head acts is likely to be viewed as an inefficient email structure by people working in institutional contexts. However, the current study demonstrates that the majority of American students delayed their request head acts, while Chinese students tend to place request head acts at the beginning of emails. Delayed request head acts cannot be considered as a pragmatic failure since this is a characteristic of most emails written by students who are native speakers of American English. We cannot exalt native speakers' language use as the standard to which we compare non-native speakers' language use (Firth & Wagner, 1997); however, since this requestive feature is a typical rhetorical move of the majority of native speakers' email requests, it should not be considered a pragmatic failure. Therefore, although we should not assume that all native speakers' language use is appropriate, common and typical features and moves are not inappropriate.

Some American emails with low-imposition, high-entitlement requests end once the request head acts are given, while high-imposition emails may contain more external modification, such as apology, acknowledging the imposition involved, orientation to the possibilities that the professors may not want to agree to grant the request, and expressions of gratitude. However, Chinese emails do not contain such external modification. The results confirm the findings of Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) that emails written by non-native speakers of English had a number of pragmatic failures that were mainly caused by underuse of modifications, employing inappropriate modifications, not acknowledging imposition on instructors, and insufficient and student-centered explanation for making the request.

In the following section, I focus on comparing American and Chinese students' request head acts across various request types. Table 1 to Table 4 include request types and request head

acts that appeared in those request types for each email category. The number in the parenthesis is the number of appearances of each request head act. All request head acts appeared once in the dataset except information-seeking interrogatives + or + another question for seeking advice that appeared twice (see Table 3). It should be noted that the same email request type can have different rankings of imposition and entitlement levels and can fall under different email categories. For example, emails requesting appointments can be either low imposition, high entitlement, or high imposition, high entitlement (as shown in Table 2 and Table 3) depending on the specific scenarios where the requests happen. An example is a student requesting to meet within their course professor’s office hours to ask questions about course materials is low imposition, while a student requesting to meet with a professor whom they are not familiar with outside of their office hours to request feedback on a research project is high-imposition.

**Table 1**  
*Request head acts in high-imposition low-entitlement emails*

High imposition, low entitlement		
Request types	American students	Chinese students
Request for appointment/mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ If I could meet with you ..., that would be a tremendous help in ... (1)<sup>2</sup></li> <li>➤ I was wanting to know if it would be possible to communicate...(1)</li> <li>➤ I was wondering if you... (1)</li> <li>➤ Would you be free to meet...? (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I am writing to invite... (1)</li> <li>➤ So could we meet... when you are available? (1)</li> <li>➤ We can meet at your convenience to discuss...(1)</li> <li>➤ We would be grateful if you could please ... (1)</li> </ul>
Request for recommendation letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to ...(1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I am writing to request...(1)</li> <li>➤ I wonder whether I can put your name...(1)</li> </ul>
Rescheduling a meeting		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Can we ...? + Let me know if ... (1)</li> </ul>

**Table 2**  
*Request head acts in high-imposition high-entitlement emails*

High imposition, high entitlement		
Request types	American students	Chinese students
Reporting work and asking for feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I welcome any suggestions you have for ... (1)</li> <li>➤ I wanted to share it with you first cause it seems like a very complicated equation, so I wasn't sure if there was another version you were thinking of. (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Could you please give us some suggestions...? + Information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> <li>➤ Please + imperative + appreciation (1)</li> <li>➤ If you have any questions or suggestions of the revised version, please let me know. (1)</li> <li>➤ Could you give me some comments about it? (1)</li> </ul>
Request for instruction		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Could you please tell me...? (1)</li> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> </ul>
Request for action		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Could you please help us...? (1)</li> </ul>
Request for an appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I was wondering if you were available to meet... (1)</li> </ul>	
Rescheduling a meeting		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Name and I have received an email from Name that we need to reschedule our meeting time for a couple of weeks. (1)</li> </ul>

**Table 3**  
***Request head acts in low-imposition high-entitlement emails***

Low imposition, high entitlement		
Request types	American students	Chinese students
Request for permission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ May I take this as my one excused-without-a-doctor's-note absence? (1)</li> <li>➤ May I please be added to the list to be given the extra credit problems? (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ May I book...? (1)</li> </ul>
Request for an appointment		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I hope I could talk ...with you... (1)</li> <li>➤ May I talk to you in today afternoon? Or next week? (1)</li> </ul>
Request for action		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Could you please share...? (1)</li> </ul>
Reporting work to employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Please let me know if ... (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I am wondering should I ...? (1)</li> </ul>

<p>Seeking advice from advisors or course instructors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives + or + another question (2)</li> <li>➤ information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ So which choice do you recommend me to take? (1)</li> <li>➤ [student's opinion] What do you think? (1)</li> <li>➤ Would you please tell me...? Or would you like to recommend...? (1)</li> <li>➤ Do you think I could ...[a personal opinion]? (1)</li> <li>➤ How about [student's opinion] What is your opinion? (1)</li> </ul>
<p>Request for instruction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ If you have any tweaks you'd like me to make please let me know. (1)</li> <li>➤ I have a few questions... that I am hoping you can clarify for me. + information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> <li>➤ I was wondering + information seeking questions (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Could you please help me...? (1)</li> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives + could you please check this? (1)</li> </ul>
<p>Request for information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives (4)</li> <li>➤ I am wondering + information seeking interrogatives + Please let me know if I should... (1)</li> <li>➤ I was hoping you could explain.... (1)</li> <li>➤ Information seeking question ... or...another information seeking question + when you get the chance please let me know. (1)</li> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives + Please let me know! (1)</li> <li>➤ Is it possible to ...? (A complaint) (1)</li> <li>➤ I was wondering if ...? (A complaint) (1)</li> <li>➤ I'd like to know what about the essay prompts. (1)</li> <li>➤ I was also wondering if you have uploaded your Prezi presentation and if so, where they would be located. (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ I wonder if + information seeking question (1)</li> <li>➤ Could you please give me ...? (1)</li> <li>➤ May I ask a few questions? + Information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> <li>➤ Do you mean that you will...? (1)</li> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> <li>➤ Information seeking interrogatives + or + Information seeking interrogatives (1)</li> <li>➤ Do you know + information seeking question (1)</li> </ul>

**Table 4**  
***Request head acts in low-imposition low-entitlement emails***

Low imposition, low entitlement		
Request types	American students	Chinese students
Request for permission	➤ Would it be possible to ...? (1)	
Request for action	➤ Would it be possible to ... + so [a reason]? (1)	➤ Is it possible to ...? (1)

American students used a larger variety of modifications across request types and different imposition and entitlement sections except for the request for information. American students used past progressive (I was wanting..., I was wondering...), modal verbs (would, could...), conditional structure, etc. in their request head acts to soften the force of their requests. They inquire about the possibility, willingness, and ability of the requestees' to comply with the requests by using lexical modifiers such as "would you be willing to..." Chinese students used more limited expressions than American students.

American students use more indirect strategies in high imposition, low entitlement and high imposition, high entitlement emails. They either used at least one mitigation in a request head act or requestive hints. For example, they used "I was wondering...", "I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to...", and "I was wanting to know if it would be possible". Past tense ("wanted", "was wondering", "was wanting"), modal verbs ("would") are used, and students orient to the possibility that the requestees do not want to grant the request by using if-clause ("if you would be willing to...", "if it would be possible..."). Requestive hints also appear in both high-imposition and low-entitlement, and high-imposition and high-entitlement requests. All the request head acts in reporting work and asking for feedback emails used requestive hints. Instead of explicitly expressing what they want requestees to do, the students suggested that the requestees could provide them with suggestions, but they do not require them to comply with their requests. This could reduce the threat to the requestees' negative face, which is especially important when the imposition level of the request is already high.

Chinese students' emails, in contrast, are more direct because most of the request head acts make the force of the requests explicit. For example, for the request for appointment/mentoring and the request for recommendation letters where students have low entitlement to make the requests, Chinese students used "I am writing to invite/request...", "Could we meet...", "could you please..." to make these requests. Some students used declarative sentences without mitigations, such as "we can meet..." and "...we need to reschedule our meeting...", which did not show orientation to the possibility that requestees would not or could not grant the requests.

Two imperatives were used by Chinese students for high imposition requests. Although American students used "if clause + please let me know", "Can we... + Let me know if..." and "Please let me know" many times when requesting information, they never used it in high-imposition requests. A Chinese student used "please" with imperatives ("Please check it") to request feedback from his professor. Compared with American students' emails under this category, which contain requestive hints, imperatives that start with "please" are very direct.

Only two high-imposition level emails from Chinese students have modifiers ("we would be grateful if you could please...", "I wonder whether I can..."). However, these modifiers are still different from those in American students' emails. The first example expresses the student's appreciation which is followed by "could you please...", a phrase that American students did not use in any situation. The second example used present tense, but American students tend to use

the past tense.

For request for instruction, request for action, and rescheduling a meeting under the high-imposition category, request head acts written by Chinese students used "could you please...", information-seeking interrogatives, and a non-mitigated declarative sentence. Although the data does not have any emails that request action, instruction, or rescheduling a meeting written by American students under high-imposition, high-entitlement category, compared with American emails with other request types under the high-imposition, low-entitlement section, these request head acts are very different because they are not mitigated.

For request for instruction/information/advice from advisors or course instructors under low-imposition, high-entitlement category, American students used many information-seeking interrogatives ("But exactly what sections or pages are those?"). Some of the interrogatives are followed by "please let me know"; some of them contain an embedded if-clause. Four information-seeking questions are headed by "I am wondering ..." or "I was/am hoping you..." It is noted that the number of lexical and syntactic modifications used for those request types is lower than those used for high-imposition requests. A student used a declarative sentence to make the request, which indicated he expected the requestee to comply with the request. Only four request head acts for the request for information are mitigated. Two of them were mitigated, but these two requests are actually complaints in the form of a request for information. Therefore, the requester might mitigate the requests to soften his complaints.

Similarly, Chinese students also used non-mitigated information-seeking questions when requesting instruction or information. One of the information-seeking questions follows "may I ask a few questions", which functions as a pre-request. Another interrogative is headed by "do you know" to elicit the requestee's suggestions. Similar to American students' emails, Chinese students used "I wonder if..." before asking an information-seeking question. Different from American emails, none of the Chinese emails under this category used "please let me know" with interrogatives.

One American email requesting advice from his advisor contains many information-seeking questions that are not mitigated. Chinese students, however, did not use information-seeking questions for this type of request. They usually explain a problem/challenge or a situation they are facing, then use phrases like "do you know", "what is your opinion", "what do you think", and "which choice do you recommend" to request suggestions. However, American students did not use such phrases or sentences in these contexts.

American and Chinese students both used interrogatives starting with "may I" when requesting permission from their advisors or course instructors. There was no request for an appointment in low-entitlement, high-imposition emails written by American students, but Chinese students used "I hope..." and "may I..." to make the requests. The forms of these two request head acts align with other request head acts written by American students under this category.

Reporting work to employers and asking for feedback is also a type of low-imposition, high-entitlement request, but the form of this request is different from those in other request types. One reason to explain this is that reporting work to employers does not pose any imposition on the requestees. Instead, the requesters were doing the work to benefit their employers and they followed their employers' instructions. The American students' request head act used "please" with imperatives (please let me know if...) The Chinese student's email, in contrast, was mitigated by "I am wondering...", but the mitigation was not needed here.

For low-imposition, low-entitlement requests, both American and Chinese students soften

their request by asking the requestees' possibility of granting the requests. American students used "would it be possible to..." and the Chinese student used "is it possible to..." American students' email head acts are more mitigated because they used modal verb "would".

American students' request head acts for high-imposition and low-entitlement, high-imposition and high-entitlement, and low-imposition and low-entitlement requests are generally more mitigated than low-imposition, high-entitlement requests. Imposition level and the requester's entitlement to make requests are both important factors affecting native speakers' language choices. When the imposition is low and the requester is entitled to make a request, the request does not impact the requestee's or the requester's face. Therefore, it is likely that the requestee will comply with the request, so the requester may feel it unnecessary to mitigate the request. However, there are not such obvious differences in Chinese students' request head acts among these four categories. Their request head acts are mitigated in almost the same degree regardless of the imposition involved and the level of entitlement. This indicates that Chinese students may not identify the factors that affect language choices when making requests in specific contexts.

Overall, there is some overlap between request strategies written by Chinese students and those written by American students. Both groups of students can use "I wonder" and "is it possible", but Chinese students do not use more complex structures, such as "I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to..." Chinese students were able to use the present tense in request head acts, but American students can use past simple and past progressive as well. Chinese students could use "could you please", "could we" and "may I" in their request head acts, but American students never used "could you please" and "could we". The modal verb "would" is a common verb used to soften requests used by American students, but Chinese students did not demonstrate sufficient ability to use "would" in different contexts. American students used imperatives headed by "please" only for low-imposition, high-entitlement requests, but Chinese students used imperatives for high-imposition, low-entitlement requests. Chinese students also used consultative devices, such as "do you think", for requests for advice from advisors or course instructors.

I suggest several reasons that may explain why Chinese emails differ from those of Americans. Most Chinese participants were taking or have taken American academic writing courses. American academic writing conventions require a writer to clearly indicate the main points of the essay in the introduction of the essay. Then, the writer is expected to provide support for the main points in the rest of the essay. A writer is also expected to provide a topic sentence where he/she explicitly indicates the main idea of the paragraph near the beginning of the paragraph. Chinese students may be so used to the conventions of American academic writing that they tend to use the rules in academic email requests. This explanation can account for a result of the study that Chinese students tend to give request head acts near the beginning of an email. They may assume that this structure can make the intention of their emails clearer and easier to read without realizing that directness is usually dispreferred in requests to people in higher status. Therefore, it is important to add email writing classes to academic writing courses to remind students that academic writing conventions do not apply to all types of writing.

Another reason that could explain Chinese students' misuse of "please" is that they used "please" as the equivalent of Chinese "qing" without realizing that their functions are different. When "qing" first appeared in traditional Chinese literature, it had two meanings: X respectfully ask(s) Y to do something and X respectfully ask(s) Y to allow X to do something. In modern Chinese, the meaning of "qing" has changed to "ask/request/tell/suggest someone do something

politely”, so it is a word that shows politeness but does not necessarily show respect (Song, 2010). Qu and Chen (2001) suggest that “qing” can be used to decrease the threat on the hearer’s negative face unless the two interlocutors have a close relationship. Chinese students are taught that the equivalent of “qing” is “please”, so they also use “please” with imperatives and in “could you please” without realizing the pragmatic function of “qing” is not the same as “please”. In addition, many Chinese students learn that “could you please” is the most polite form to make a request regardless of the scenarios. It can account for the overuse of “could you please” by Chinese students across request types.

Students’ limited English proficiency can also be a hindrance to writing appropriate email requests. I have discussed a number of emails that contain linguistic errors that impede communication. Although other emails that I analyze in this paper do not contain grammatical errors that could lead to miscommunication, it is likely that the students have not mastered complex syntactic structures with multiple modifiers for high-imposition requests.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen, there are significant differences between emails written by American and by Chinese students. I will discuss implications for the field of interlanguage pragmatics and for teaching ESL/EFL to Chinese students. I will also discuss the limitations of this study and topics for future research.

### ***Implications for Interlanguage Pragmatics***

The current study employed the methodology of conversation analysis in order to analyze email requests in context. Most interlanguage pragmatics studies use the CCSARP framework. These studies select request head acts and categorize them into different types according to their directness. However, request head acts grouped into the same category can vary significantly in terms of directness and appropriateness. For example, Lee (2004) categorized “could you”, “can I”, and “I was wondering if” as preparatories. Zhu (2012) considered “I would like to” and “I want” as want-statements. After coding the request head acts, these researchers consider the requestive strategies in the same category as the same strategy. This categorization framework may not accurately reflect the functions of request head acts properly. As the current study has shown, “I was wondering if” is more mitigated and is usually used in high-imposition requests, while “could you” is never used by American students in any context. Even “I want” can have different meanings depending on what follows “want”. For example, “I want you to give me feedback” and “I want to ask if you would be willing to consider feedback” are different. Therefore, it is important to note the actual wording of email requests and analyze them in their social context instead of merely selecting request head acts and analyzing them in terms of semantic features.

Zhu (2012) used the number of indirect requestive strategies and modifiers for enhancing politeness as an indicator for students’ pragmalinguistic competence. However, the frequencies of requestive strategies and modifications are not necessarily related to pragmatic competence, politeness, or appropriateness. Although the current study did not measure the degree of appropriateness of requestive strategies, the analysis has demonstrated that American students did not use many modifications for low-imposition high-entitlement requests, especially when they request information. What strategies to use are correlated with the imposition and the entitlement. In addition, other information that the sender provides, such as greetings, expressions that convey gratitude, and apologies, can all affect the recipient’s perception of an

email. This study provides a more comprehensive analysis of email requests because request head acts with all the supportive moves are examined across request types.

### ***Teaching implications***

The current study confirmed the results of many previous cross-cultural pragmatic studies that many ESL/EFL learners lack pragmatic competence when making requests. Many studies have shown that teaching pragmatics can facilitate language learners' pragmatic competence (Tateyama, 2001; Gu, 2011). Therefore, it is likely that the ability to write email requests appropriately by Chinese learners of English studying in the U.S. can be improved through proper instruction. In recent years, many Chinese students have chosen to receive their higher education in English-speaking countries. However, the differences in pragmatics from the target language, more specifically, the differences in requestive strategies in academic emails, could lead to miscommunication with native speakers of English. Therefore, the teaching of pragmatic competence should be paid more attention to.

The findings of the study indicate that a number of email requests written by Chinese students did not vary much according to contexts. Therefore, Chinese students may not be aware of what factors they should consider when selecting linguistic choices in email requests. The imposition level of a request and the requester's entitlement to make the request are two factors that interplay with linguistic choices. English classes should cultivate learners' awareness of identifying and analyzing these factors in scenarios. The request type, the difficulty to comply with the request, and whether the request falls into the requestee's responsibilities all affect the imposition level of the request. Whether a requester has entitlement to make requests is related to the relationship with the requestee and whether the actions requested are a part of the requestee's responsibilities. Awareness-raising activities can help learners to make connections between American cultural norms, linguistic choices and their pragmatic functions, and can improve their pragmatic competence.

In consideration of Chinese students' use of strategies and modifications of making requests, linguistic forms that can be used in email requests can be taught explicitly. Explicit instruction is more effective than implicit instruction in facilitating the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge because it raises learners' pragmatic awareness and improves their abilities to select appropriate forms for specific contexts (Gu, 2011). Therefore, it is suggested that English instructors could choose important request strategies and modifications used by native speakers of American English and teach them explicitly.

The results of the study show that Chinese students do not use the past tense to soften their requests as well as American students. Therefore, instructors could teach students to use past tense, such as "I was thinking..." and "I was wondering..." to soften the force of a request. The use of modal verbs in requests should also be taught. Both Chinese and American students used "may I..." in requests for permission. This similarity shows that Chinese students are able to use the modal verb, "may", correctly in email requests. Another modal verb that Chinese students used is "could", but they used "could" inappropriately in "could you please..." Since "could you please" is never used by American students in any context, instructors should emphasize that "could you please..." is not appropriate in an email written by students to faculty. "Would" also needs to be taught as it appears in American students' high-imposition requests frequently. Chinese students should learn some formulaic expressions like "would it be possible to...", "would it be possible for you...", and "would you be willing to..."

Request head acts written by Chinese students have no more than one internal

modification (“I am wondering...”, “I am hoping...”); therefore, instructors should teach students how to use a combination of modifications in one sentence. Examples that have a combination of lexical and syntactic modifications should be provided to Chinese students. Some examples are “I was wondering if it would be possible to...”, “I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to...” and “I was wanting to know if it would be possible to...”

Regarding the sequence of information in email requests, it is important to teach students to delay their request head acts. Considering that many Chinese students start their emails with request head acts, they should learn that they should first greet the requestees to establish a good relationship, next, provide enough contextual information to help requestees understand why they are making the requests as well as give sufficient reasons to support their requests. Request head acts usually do not appear until enough reasons and background information are introduced.

Instructors need to help Chinese students to enlarge their external modifications as well, which are usually used after request head acts. While American students express their gratitude, compliment the requestees to satisfy their positive face, apologize for making the requests and acknowledge the imposition posed on the requestees, Chinese students usually only show their appreciation. They need to learn to use other external modifications to support their requests.

After learners are equipped with the requestive strategies and modifications, they need to study how to match the strategies and modifications with different levels of imposition and entitlement. For high-imposition emails, regardless of the degree of entitlement the requesters have, requests need to be more indirect and mitigated. Imperatives will be inappropriate for high-imposition emails. For low-imposition, low-entitlement emails, requests also need to be mitigated but not as heavily mitigated as high-imposition emails. Chinese students should learn to use information-seeking interrogatives for low-imposition, high-entitlement requests. As for imperatives, instructors need to teach learners not to use imperatives except “please let me know” in requests for information. Learners also should be taught not to soften their requests when they are working for requestees. To teach email requests, instructors could choose authentic sample emails written by American native speakers to expose learners to target-like input.

Finally, a discussion about the differences and similarities in the way that requests and/or email requests are made between Chinese and English cultures could be necessary. The analysis of Chinese students' emails indicates that they may use Chinese cultural norms in English requests. Even though Chinese students who participated in the study had studied English for at least six years, their English is still very likely to be under the influence of Chinese culture. Therefore, in English instruction, it is important to help students understand the differences between their cultures and the norms of the target language.

### ***Limitations of the current study***

This study used a conversation analysis perspective to examine academic email requests to faculty and compare Chinese students' and American students' requestive strategies. This study simply pointed out the differences and similarities between English language learners' request patterns and those of native English speakers. The results indicate that, for some request types, the majority of American students who participated in this study used similar requestive strategies, but Chinese students employed different strategies for the same request types. English instructors can show learners how native speakers of American English write requests so that their emails can be more native-like. However, without analyzing recipients' perceptions of the requests, we cannot know whether what Chinese native speakers do differently when making email requests from

English native speakers is considered impolite by American English native speakers. Furthermore, native speakers of American English could write impolite email requests. Therefore, pedagogical implications discussed in the previous section can help ESL/EFL learners write emails more similar to those written by American students but do not necessarily help them write emails more politely. To examine the politeness level of requestive strategies used by both Chinese and American students, further studies that recruit a number of English speakers working as instructors in the university who have lived in the U.S. for many years and therefore are considered to be influenced by American cultural norms to rate typical request strategies in terms of politeness level are required.

Another limitation of the study is that we did not ask participants of the survey to leave any contact information, which poses difficulties for us to analyze some emails. Some emails are difficult to analyze because of researchers' lack of background information. For example, in an email that requested an appointment with a course instructor, an American student specified a date and a time slot that he wanted to meet with the instructor. Whether the instructor held office hours during that time or not directly affects the imposition of the request, which in turn could lead to different pragmatic norms. Although the survey required participants to provide some contextual information, it was not adequate for researchers to analyze those emails. Therefore, when designing such surveys, collecting participants' contact information to ask post-survey clarification questions is important.

In addition, to have a more in-depth discussion of the findings of this research, conducting a conversation analysis study on Chinese requests in face-to-face conversations by native speakers of Chinese is necessary for understanding whether the requestive strategies present in students' emails are influenced by requestive strategies they use in speech. Finally, participants were asked to submit authentic emails they have sent, but the analysis could be more fruitful if participants provide insights into their use of linguistic features and requestive strategies from their own perspectives. In this way, researchers can also understand the influence of culture-specific ideologies and students' own identities on student-faculty interaction in emails.

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**APPENDIX A: ACADEMIC EMAILS DATA COLLECTION**

\*Please both sign the consent form and type your name here if you agree to participate in the research (if you need a copy of the consent form, print the consent form please).

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sAT1EPO-OoqDKvpGMq3eTq4MRb83WF8H9DwQXBaZekQ/edit?usp=sharing>

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Section 1

\*You are a native speaker of  
Mandarin Chinese  
American English

If you are neither a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese nor American English, you do not need to fill out this survey.

\*If you are a native speaker of Mandarin, are you from mainland China?

Yes.

No. If not, you do not need to fill out this survey.

\*If you are a native speaker of Mandarin, how many years have you been in the United States?

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\*Have you ever been in other English-speaking countries? If you have, where have you been, and how long did you stay there?

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\*If you are a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, did you receive your high school education in an English-speaking country?

Yes. If so, you do not need to continue with this survey.

No.

\*Have you ever learnt how to write emails in class?

Yes.

No.

\*What is your gender?

Male

Female

\*What is your age?

---

\*Are you an undergraduate or a graduate student?

Undergraduate.

Graduate.

\*Do you have a major in Linguistics or English?

Yes.

No.

## Section 2

Description: Please select 3-5 emails written in English that you sent to your instructors here in the US. If you are a native speaker of Chinese, please select at least one or two emails you sent to Chinese native speaking professors and at least one or two emails you sent to American professors. If you are a native American English speaker, please select emails that you sent to American professors.

Please delete sensitive information (for example, your university, department, your and the professor's name, your UIN, class name, program name, etc), and use the following markers to replace the information: the first name of the professor--> FN; the last name of the professor--> LN; your first name--> S\_FN; your last name--> S\_LN; your UIN-->UIN; a class number--> Class XX; university name--> Univ XX; department name--> Dept XX; any personal name--> NAME; email address--> EMAIL; other address--> ADDRESS; phone number--> PHONE. For example, if you write "Professor Smith", change the email to read "Professor LN".

\*Please copy and paste the first academic email here:

\_\_\_\_\_

\*Is the instructor a native Chinese speaker or native American English speaker?

Chinese.

American English.

\*What is the instructor's approximate age?

\_\_\_\_\_

\*What's the instructor's gender?

\_\_\_\_\_

\*In one or two sentences, describe the relationship between you and the instructor (e.g. The instructor is my thesis advisor, and I meet him every week).

\_\_\_\_\_

\*On scale of 1 to 7, how would you describe your relationship with the instructor (7 the closest, 1 the most distant)?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Section 4-5: Repetition of Section 2